

Study Notes: Mark 2:13-17
February 21, 2021: “The Problem with Grace”
Prepared by Reverend Robert W. Rice
Pastor, Muncy Baptist Church

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them.

- Capernaum is near the Sea of Galilee, which is sometimes referred to as Lake Gennesaret in Mark’s Gospel. Like He had done earlier in His ministry, Jesus again walks along the lake, and gathers a great crowd around Him. As the crowd gathers, Jesus begins to teach them.

As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

- During his walk, Jesus passes by the tax collector’s booth, where Levi (also known as Matthew in the Gospel of Matthew) is collecting taxes for the Roman government. The Faithlife Study Bible explains that the tax booth was “likely a booth for collecting transport tolls and customs duties. Galilee was subject to Roman administration in the time of Jesus. Tax collectors would have gathered revenues for Herod Antipas, the local representative of Roman rule in Galilee.”
- As a tax collector, Levi would have been considered a traitor to the Jewish people. By his own choice, Levi would have been unworthy and unclean to the Jews and they would have wanted nothing to do with him. Furthermore, he would have also been regarded as dishonest, because tax collectors often cheated the people to make a living.
- Even with all this baggage, Jesus still calls Levi to follow Him and become a disciple. Levi leaves his job and follows Jesus at once. The Pillar New Testament Commentary notes that this event is perhaps even more scandalous than Jesus’ encounter with the leper: “It may be that contact with Levi was actually more offensive than contact with a leper since a leper’s condition was not chosen whereas a tax collector’s was.”

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.

- Later that evening, Levi hosts a dinner and invites Jesus. Given Levi’s career, those gathered at the house are other tax collectors and other people who are referred to simply as sinners.
 - When the Gospels use the term sinners, they are referring to people who the religious authorities consider unworthy. The Faithlife Study Bible notes: “While certainly many of these people were involved in habits, lifestyles or occupations that led to unrighteous behavior, the label seems to be applied primarily to distinguish between those who were considered pious and those who were not.”
 - The New American Commentary adds about the use of the term sinners: “The reference is not to immoral or irreligious persons but to those who because of the necessity of spending all their time earning a bare subsistence were not able to keep the law, especially the oral law, as the scribes thought they should. As a result the scribes despised them. Perhaps a better translation would be “outcasts.””

- Even though this group of people is thought to be unworthy, Jesus and the other disciples still choose to fellowship with them by sharing a meal. In Jesus' time, sharing a meal was a sign of friendship and intimacy. By sharing a meal with this group of people, Jesus was showing them love, acceptance and belonging. In the eyes of Jesus, these people belonged to the Kingdom of God as much as anyone else.

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

- Much like His earlier interaction with the leper (See Mark 1:40-45), Jesus was doing something that would have been considered scandalous to the religious leaders and teachers of the day.
 - The religious leaders of the day are identified by Mark as Pharisees. The Faithlife Study Bible provides a brief summary of who the Pharisees were: One of the three Jewish schools of thought in Palestine at the time of Jesus according to the Jewish historian Josephus. While the extent of their influence is unclear, the Pharisees apparently had some influence in political, religious and social spheres in Jewish Palestine. The Pharisees were known for their skill at interpreting the Law of Moses, and they held strict views on what was appropriate behavior for a righteous person. In Mark, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for holding to traditions rather than obeying God's commands (7:6–13). In ch. 2, they condemn Jesus' choice to eat with those they viewed as unrighteous and unworthy, but Jesus is not interested in their rules about who is worthy of His attention.
- Seeing Jesus eating with this group of people causes the religious leaders to question His disciples. Their question is really a rhetorical question that serves as a rebuke. They are stunned at the behavior of Jesus, and cannot believe that anyone who considers themselves a rabbi would choose such company.
- The Pillar New Testament Commentary does an excellent job of explaining the trouble that the religious leaders had with the actions of Jesus: “The scandal of this story is that Jesus does not make moral repentance a precondition of his love and acceptance. Rather, Jesus loves and accepts tax collectors and sinners as they are. If they forsake their evil and amend their lives, they do so, as did Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), not in order to gain Jesus' favor but because Jesus has loved them as sinners. Jesus' association with such people is not coincidental. He does not happen to be with them or wait for invitations. He initiates the fellowship, “ ‘I must stay at your house today’ ” (Luke 19:5). We are not told how many sinners and tax collectors repented and reformed. We are only told that Jesus sowed love as profligately and uncalculatedly as the sower who threw seed in unpromising places (Mark 4:3–9). It is this that scandalized the religious leaders of his day, as it scandalizes those who define the gospel in terms of pure moral reformation and character formation of our day. Jesus communicates in word and deed that accepting and following him are more important than following Torah. When the unreformed and unregenerate do that, they will enter the kingdom of God before the scribes and Pharisees. In table fellowship with “sinners and tax collectors,” Jesus scandalously asserts his *exousia*, his own person over Torah, and the profligate love of God over merit. That is the scandal of grace.”

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

- Jesus responds to the question, by affirming what His mission on this earth is. He has come to bring healing to sinners.
 - The New American Commentary explains the purpose of this statement (and of Mark’s account): “The love of Jesus for all kinds of sinners, his initiative in seeking them, his giving them full acceptance, and his desire to have close fellowship with them was a new and revolutionary element in religion and morals. Mark intended to convey the message that the disciples of Jesus should have the same attitude.”
 - The Pillar New Testament Commentary adds: “The saying is a defense of Jesus’ outreach to the disreputable, not a suggestion that there are some who are exempt from his call. The fact that Jesus can be found in the company of people such as Levi reminds us of the difference between his mission and that of the scribes. They come to enlighten; he comes to redeem. Given that mission, it is as senseless for Jesus to shun tax collectors and sinners as for a doctor to shun the sick. The grace of God extends to and overcomes the worst forms of human depravity. Ironically, in one sense great sinners stand closer to God than those who think themselves righteous, for sinners are more aware of their need of the transforming grace of God. “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Rom 5:20).”